

Testimony in Support of H 7225/ H 8108

I write to you today as the President of RIC/AFT Local 1819, the Full-Time Faculty Union at Rhode Island College, to support the extension of the Hope Scholarship pilot program.

I want to begin by thanking you for the investment you have already made in Rhode Island's future by supporting the initial Hope pilot program. The Hope Scholarship has already paid dividends for Rhode Island College students, who have been able to complete their degrees with less debt and less financial stress. But the students who have been able to benefit in these first years were those who had already somehow managed to stay on track despite financial pressures and the experience of living through COVID in late adolescence. In order for the Hope Scholarship to make its real impact known, we need to extend the pilot so that the high school students of today can make their entry into postsecondary education knowing that Hope is there for them.

Guaranteed tuition programs make their biggest impact on students by helping them know that college is a real option for them. Some of the students who qualify for the Hope Scholarship do not even receive monetary benefits, given the last-dollar nature of the funds. Yet for a prospective college student thinking about what choices to make as they approach high school graduation, the complex language of financial aid forms and Pell grants and work-study is hard to digest. In contrast, telling those young people that if they achieve the goals we have set out for them in their first two years, they will be able to complete the last two years tuition-free: that is a simple, clear message, a message that tells them college is for them. Extending the pilot will give high school guidance counselors time to get the message of Hope to students as they begin their college search, which for most students is in their junior year, and thus time for students to adjust their college choices and educational patterns to reflect the availability of Hope.

This extension has become only more important given the federal FAFSA debacle students are experiencing this year. National coverage has made clear that students are rethinking their college plans due to the federal processing delays—through no fault of our state or our college. It therefore seems likely that data based on this year's high school graduating class will not be representative of the real impact of the Hope Scholarship.

Of course, the real reason to extend Hope is for the students. Students (I'll use initials instead of names to protect their privacy) like A, a double major and athlete who started at RIC this fall and is doing everything right to make sure she will be eligible for Hope when she is a junior, even already looking at internships in her field for this summer. Students like V, who has worked as a bouncer to pay his way through school and who will be the kind of law enforcement officer our community needs after he finishes his degree in 2025. It is these students who will be the future of Rhode Island, and we need to ensure that students just like A and V who are finishing up their sophomore years in high school right now will have the same chances to succeed in higher education.

For all of these reasons, I hope you will support the extension of the Hope Scholarship at Rhode Island College. Our students, our state, and our future will benefit in untold ways from this investment.

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